
Organisations lacking a digital understanding

ANTONY HARROWELL THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 21, 2017

Companies and organisations, public and private, are now seeking to implement something “digital”, whether it be strategies, services, solutions, platforms or a myriad of other things. But are they doing it because they have a clear understanding of the objectives they are trying to achieve, or is it a case of, because everyone else is trying to transform through this thing called “digital” so must they?

Presently it would appear to be the latter, with statistics showing that many businesses and government agencies have little clarity about what they are trying to achieve through technologies they adopt and as such never realise the expected value.

What is clear is the pace with which companies move to become early adopters without a clear strategy in play, is what ends up landing them in trouble.

Creating connections between government and community is a role Australia’s Federal Digital Transformation Office (DTO) should have been charged with performing — creating a digital road map and strategy to lay the foundation for a platform of transformational change that would make it easier to do business with the government.

At times, decisions are made based on factors which make sense only to those in control of the levers, raising the question, “why only one year after the establishment of the DTO, why is it now being relaunched as an Agency — the Digital Transformation Agency (DTA)?”

Does the change of one word from “Office” to “Agency”, the appointment of a new captain and the shuffling of deckchairs make that much of a difference?

Digital can mean many things, and it’s the what it means and the specific values it can create, that varies from organisation to organisation — simply, there is no one size fits all digital strategy or application.

The ousted chief of the DTO Paul Shetler recently provided his view into what he perceived was the issues with ICT within the Australian government. He provided a “reality check” when it comes to the perception of the huge transaction volumes that the government services provide compared to those through Twitter or the Nasdaq. He also spoke of a “fear of digital” and “a stripping of the technical skills within the public sector” leading to an over reliance on contractors and external organisations.

But are these perceived issues a reality or more a lack of understanding of digital or fundamentally what works or doesn’t work in Australia?

There is no “fear” of digital, but there is a lack of understanding of what it is, in many areas of the public and private sector. The reality may be that transaction volumes are much higher through Twitter or the NASDAQ, but the transaction types are completely different. The government should not be moving along any line of trying to focus on reskilling technical resources, but instead focus on understanding their business and strengthening their procurement and partner management capabilities to ensure that they source the right solutions to their business problems as opposed to mandating technical solutions.

The inclusion of the federal government IT procurement functionality in the DTA, is an attempt, to provide greater transparency on the return on investment from government-led ICT projects and while any move to loosen the restrictive ICT procurement will be welcomed by the local industry, the taskforce faces the arduous task of rewiring established methodology and an internal culture.

The government is looking to “open up” 10 per cent of the annual federal government IT spend, approximately \$560 million for start-ups and smaller Australian players. Although an admirable intent, it’s something that will, at a minimum, require a complete overhaul of the current procurement processes and could potentially require rewriting the way that procurement is performed.

Procurement needs to become a far more communicative process, as no longer is it going to be good enough to try to evaluate responses from behind a screen, as small organisations need assistance in responding to requirements and there’s currently no way that they can compete with the resources available to larger organisations.

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